

Backward march of a nation

The political structure, and nature and culture of the political parties in Bangladesh are such that it is highly unlikely that such a politician will emerge from within the political process. This is a Catch 22 situation. In any event, to begin with, the nation needs a politician (or ideally a statesman) who has a vision, who can rise above petty party politics and unite the nation and lead it towards the path of peace and prosperity.

ABDUR RAZZAQ

NINETEEN Fifty-Four. Elections to the Bengal legislative assembly took place barely seven years after the end of the British colonial rule. The ruling party, the Muslim League was routed by the United Front. Nurul Amin, the Chief Minister of East Bengal, was defeated by Khaliq Nawaz, a student leader.

In those days the country had no constitution. There were no fundamental rights, as such. It was run under the Government of India Act 1935. Elections took place under a party government. The concept of caretaker government was unknown, and unheard of. The police, the civil bureaucracy, the para-military forces, the intelligence services and the state media were all controlled by the Chief Minister. Even then he lost. And he accepted the defeat in good grace. Fifty years on, can we imagine an election under a party government where an influential minister, not to speak of a Chief/Prime Minister, would lose? Certainly not.

In those days politicians used to come to politics to serve the country: to give and not to take. Good

education, good family background and professional competence, and not money and muscle, were the dominating factors in politics. Politics as a lucrative profession was not in the political dictionary. It was based on principles: it was not a clash of personalities.

Abul Mansur Ahmed wrote in his "Fifty Years of Politics" that in the 1954 elections, when they sensed that their opponents were going to forfeit their deposits, they requested the voters to cast some votes in favour of their opponents so that they were not politically humiliated. What a sharp contrast between the past and the present! A sizeable number of present-day politicians would be happy to see their political opponents not only humiliated, but physically eliminated as well.

Undoubtedly, in the last 50 years the country has marched backwards. The root cause of this backward march of the nation can be found in our sick politics. In 2007, it is simply unimaginable to hold an acceptable parliamentary elections under a party government.

The question is: why this negative march? This is primarily because the institutions have been

damaged to the extent of being destroyed, firstly by successive martial law regimes and secondly by the power hungry politicians who wanted to politicize the institutions and administration so that they could cling to power. Power they had to relinquish sooner rather than later, but in the process irreparable damage has been done to the Republic.

A stark contrast with India, our next-door neighbour. India – as it stands today – was never a unified country before the arrival of the British in the eighteenth century. With all its diversity – in language, in religion, in ethnicity – it survived and prospered to become one of the 21st century's biggest industrial powers. This is primarily because its founding fathers had a vision. Jawaharlal Nehru – the lifetime prime minister from 1947 to 1964 – was a "convicted democrat." He wrote an anonymous article warning Indians of the dangers of giving dictatorial powers to him (Jawaharlal Nehru). "He must be checked. We want no Caesars" [See Time, November 13, "60 years of Asian Heroes"].

In India, the institutions have survived, if not strengthened, since

the British time. This is the basic difference between Bangladesh and India, both of which obtained independence from the British at the same time. Today our institutions – the Parliament, the police, the Judiciary, the Election Commission, the civil bureaucracy – face the greatest challenge in our history. Day in and day out they are being politicised by the democratically elected governments. Every day they are losing public confidence. This is the worst irony of our fate.

It is unimaginable that the police will investigate into the wrongdoings of a sitting minister, whereas this is the routine work of police in a democracy. In the recent past, following allegations that peerages were granted in exchange of donations to the Labour Party fund, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was questioned by the British police – Scotland Yard. This has happened in other democracies as well.

Normally, in a Parliamentary democracy, the head of the state is the symbol of unity of the nation. The United Kingdom has a unique situation: the Queen is the Head of the State, and although the government is formed by a political party it is known as Her Majesty's Government. The Queen has no political colour. And it is inconceivable that she would prefer one party over another.

In successful democracies, to maintain national unity, a non-partisan neutral person is chosen as president. Credit goes to the

Awami League for choosing Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed as the president after their victory in the 1996 Parliamentary elections. But his exit from the presidency was painful. Reportedly, in the aftermath of the elections in 2001, he could not comply with the unlawful demands of the Awami League and as a result he had to leave Bangabhaban in tears.

The resignation of Professor Badrudduza Chowdhury (though a party man) from the presidency was also an unhappy one. The background and manner of exit of these two presidents will act as a serious deterrent in future for any non-partisan person with a degree of independence and dignity to accept the post of president.

The country is hopelessly divided along political lines. It is divided between "us" and "them." And such a division is found almost in all segments of the society, in all sectors and in all institutions off the country. Some quarters are nursing this division consciously and philosophising it publicly. This is simply suicidal for a nation.

Take an example. On the following day of the last US presidential elections, both the candidates – George W Bush and John Kerry – in their speeches said one thing in common: during the long campaign we have divided the nation enough, now let us unite them. Whereas both the candidates had little difference in foreign policy, it was the style of leadership and the economy where there were differences.



Take South Africa as another example of national unity. When the ugly apartheid regime was finally dismantled after enormous sacrifices, and blood and fire, the victor and the vanquished joined together to build the nation. Many an apartheid prime minister died in dignity in black Africa. Look at seventh century Arabia: the Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him), by uniting the desert nomads and the warring tribes of Medina, the Aws and Khajraj, was able to successfully challenge the mighty empires of his time – the Byzantines and the Persians.

The question is how to unite this divided nation? How do you make the sick politics sound? This is not an easy task. But this is not an impossible task, either.

A political party is the biggest engine for change in a society. And unless the politics is put right, the nation cannot get back on track. Perhaps a single honest, competent and dedicated politician can change the fate of the nation. Throughout history, there have been numerous instances. However, such a politician can only grow from within the political process.

But the political structure, and nature and culture of the political parties in Bangladesh are such that it is highly unlikely that such a politician will emerge from within the political process. This is a Catch 22 situation. In any event, to begin with, the nation needs a politician (or ideally a statesman) who has a vision, who can rise above petty party politics and unite the nation and lead it towards the path of peace and prosperity.

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New Year's gift

Where will the country's secular democratic forces feel safe? Is it too hard to put an end to the rising tide of violence, including killing and maiming of members of the minority group and the incumbent regime's political and ideological opponents, and to thwart the fast expanding ulterior activities of religious extremists.

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

WHAT could be an extraordinary new year's gift to Bangladesh this year? Probably the most recently legalized term, "fatwa."

A fatwa is a legal pronouncement in Islam made by a mufti, a scholar capable of issuing judgments on Sharia (Islamic law). Fatwas are asked for by judges or individuals, and are needed in cases where an issue of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) is undecided or uncertain. Lawsuits can be settled on the basis of a fatwa.

In Bangladesh, the legal system empowers only the courts to decide all questions relating to legal opinion on Muslim and other laws in force. In rural Bangladesh, mullahs usually use this fatwa as a weapon to be powerful where the tentacles of the law do not quite reach the common folk. Islamic militants in Bangladesh have been fighting tooth and nail for a long time to hold onto the power of delivering fatwa.

A division bench of the High Court ruled on January 1, 2001 (during the Bangladesh Awami League tenure) that all fatwas are unauthorized and illegal. The court went on to say that the very issue of fatwas should be made a punishable offence. Fatwa

has been the cause of many a woman's ruination in Bangladesh.

According to the constitution of the Bangladesh, the fundamental principles are Bengali nationalism, democracy, secularism – or in other words ensuring freedom of all religions as well as non-communal politics – and socialism, that is to say the establishment of an exploitation-free society and social justice. Secularism, non-communal politics, and socialism are the most highlighted terms in this constitution.

Did they forget these important words in their constitution when Mr. Abdul Jaill, Awami League (AL) General Secretary and 14-party alliance convener, signed a 5-point pact with Shaikhul Hadis Allama Azizul Haq, leader of Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis (BKH) on December 23?

The attacks, the most recent of a series of bombings in Bangladesh over the past year, appeared to target the country's most prestigious law courts.

More than 500 home-made bombs exploded across the country in August, killing two people and injuring more than 100. The Islamic militants have called for the imposition of Islamic law in Muslim-majority Bangladesh.

And now, Alems (Islamic clerics) will have the right to issue fatwa, which will be the most important weapon to impose Islamic law. Besides this, no law will be imposed against Quranic values, the government will take proper initiative to recognize the degrees awarded by Qaumi Madrasas, and nobody will have the right to criticize Prophet Muhammad.

Fundamentalism has been on the rise in Bangladesh ever since the country veered away from the post-independent ideology of socialism and secularism and underwent an Islamization process, and the present signed pact is one more examples of that.

There is a new regime of growing fundamentalist fervor which is being supported and strengthened by an establishment bent on maintaining the status quo, both in relation to politics in general and to gender relations in particular.

This is leading to newer more specific forms of violence against women; violence which requires the support of the village elite who are in a position to order (fatwa jari) the burning or stoning of a woman, regardless of existing legal institutions.

Vigilantism against women

accused of moral transgressions occurred in rural areas, often under a fatwa, and included punishments such as whipping. During 2005, religious leaders issued thirty-five fatwas in Bangladesh, demanding punishments ranging from lashings and other physical assaults to shunning by family and community members, according to a report from the U.S. Department of State.

The country felt shame when Mr. Harabullah, a freedom fighter, had to use his hands, which he had used to hold the national flag of Bangladesh on December 15, 1971, to tie a necklace of shoes around his neck. This recent fatwa was issued against him and his younger daughter because she had a relationship with a young man of the same locality.

Meanwhile, the AL is trying to defend by saying that it is not a contract. It is a memorandum of understanding based on an election strategy. A number of AL presidium members, leaders of its central working committee and its city, district, and upazila level leaders expressed their utter shock over the agreement.

"The five-point deal does not conform with the 14-party coalition's 23-point common national minimum programme which emphasizes elimination of religious bigotry and communalism from every level of the government and administration for establishing a democratic and secular country," said former foreign minister of Bangladesh and chairman of Gono Forum, Dr. Kamal Hossain, at a seminar held in an Indian restaurant in Queens, New York on

December 24.

Mr. Rup Kumar Bhowmick, President of the Bangladesh Hindu, Buddhist & Christian Unity Council, USA, Inc. (BHCUC) welcomed everyone to the seminar and said that the pact would put a dent in the spirit of the war of liberation.

On December 20, around 6,000 people of various professions of the Hindu community, from 28 unions of Munshiganj-1 comprising Srinagar and Sirajdikhan thanas, led by religious guru Babu Ranjit Chakravorty formally joined Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), as reported in various newspaper.

As a chief guest in that joining ceremony, BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleida Zia urged the Hindu community to vote for the BNP-led four-party alliance in the coming election. She claimed that only they could bring communal harmony in the society.

The very next day truth prevailed, and everybody came to know what actually happened. Most of them were Muslims and were forced to join BNP as Hindus by Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, a BNP ticket aspirant from Munshiganj-1.

In the weeks following the October 1, 2001 general elections, Bangladesh witnessed an outburst of systematic attacks on the minority Hindu community across the country. Many Hindu families had reportedly fled their homes and sought refuge in areas considered safe. Their houses were torched, ransacked and in many cases seized, women were raped and temples were desecrated.

During the last BNP-Jamaat

alliance rule Bangladesh has been transformed into an outpost of Islamic militancy and terrorism. Everybody knows what they did with the helpless, repressed, exploited, and ill-fated religious and ethnic minorities in Bangladesh.

Moreover, elections have proved to be a bane for the minorities of the country. To influence the outcome of the upcoming elections, an attempt has already been made to tamper with the voter list. A huge number of voters from minorities have not been enrolled in the voter list.

Religion and freedom of expression, religion and human rights, religion and women's rights, religion and democracy, or religion and freedom are always used very badly in Bangladesh. When Bangladesh was born in 1971 a secular system was quickly introduced, and no one objected to it. But in 1984, some political leaders threw secularism out and, instead, established Islam as the state religion. These politicians used religion for their own political gains, for their own interests.

Where will the country's secular democratic forces feel safe? Is it too hard to put an end to the rising tide of violence, including killing and maiming of members of the minority group and the incumbent regime's political and ideological opponents, and to thwart the fast expanding ulterior activities of religious extremists.

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Free and fair election possible, but not the results



WALIUL HAQUE KHONDKER

WHEN we all talk about "free and fair election" we assume that the result of such an election will also be fair, truly reflecting the wishes of the voters. It seems that there is a sense of complacency in the public mind. Maybe we have developed "movement fatigue."

History teaches us that nobody learns any lesson from history. There are umpteen numbers of cases proving this historical lesson. But what about current happenings? Can't any lesson be taken from what is happening now?

Truly speaking, as a law-abiding citizen of Bangladesh, since the dissolution of 8th Parliament, I am still waiting for a caretaker government headed by a non-partisan chief adviser who is below the age of 72.

So long as I don't have one, I feel sorry to be living in my own country in a constitutional vacuum. An honorable bench of the High Court was about to issue a rule mitigating my frustration as a citizen, but they were stopped by an "order."

Whether it was a "judicial," or an "administrative," order is not yet known. It couldn't have been judicial because such a premise was absent during delivery of the order i.e. Rule was not issued. It couldn't have been administrative because the High Court bench functions independently, and cannot be interfered by any authority whatsoever.

May be a full bench of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court will deliberate and decide the matter some time in the future. Hence, my sense of living in an unconstitutional morass persists.

The purpose of an elaborate introduction to my article on election results is only to awaken the citizenry to the situation of "Law and Order" at the summit level of the state functionary.

So, even if the elections are conducted fairly, meaning with long queues of men and women casting votes peacefully in all the polling centers, with local and foreign observers watching in broad daylight, and which is also being shown live by TV channels; what happens after the polling is over? Who will be there when the results are compiled and tabulated?

I'm sure no observer will be allowed, and the security cordon will keep participants and their agents/supporters away.

The result that the returning officer sends by fax to the EC will be in line with the wishes of the same people whose wish prompted the order, staying issuance of Rule (not waiting to stay the Rule itself, which would be absolutely lawful), And whose wishes prevented the honorable president from appointing the chief adviser as per the provision of the constitution.

The small-time petty officials of district administrations and the election officials who will function as presiding/returning officers cannot be expected to go against the same "wishes" where the summit level of the state has succumbed.

Hence the "blessed" result, as per the wishes of the unseen authority, will be promptly and enthusiastically announced as the final result by the EC, and will go unchallenged. By the time a credible complaint can be prepared and submitted, it will be too late. An "elected government" would have been sworn in well before that.

Is there any game plan to prevent this scenario by any quarter of the participating political parties, especially by the "Grand Alliance?" I haven't heard of any. It seems that Professor Yunus has one, and that is an all-party election monitoring committee.

The arrangement doesn't help the four-party alliance, so instead of themselves denouncing the Yunus proposal (maybe they didn't want to look like spoil-sports), they deputed "their" CTG do it for them, and it has been readily complied with. One honorable adviser has already rejected the Yunus idea in a press conference, within hours of Professor Yunus floating it.

Shouldn't the 18 party "Grand Alliance" pick-up on this and try to prevent tampering of the election results? One cannot afford to take a chance on the results of an election which is too important, and where too much is at stake. This election will be a referendum on black money backed by a shadowy force, which will not accept a fair defeat honorably. The whole nation must stand in vigil, and not let its guard down.

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Knowledge sharing: Forever a future prospect?

To overcome these obstacles, societies will have to invest massively in lifelong education for all, research, info-development and the growth of "learning societies," and to cultivate greater respect for the diversity of cognitive cultures and for local, traditional and indigenous knowledge. Knowledge sharing will not, forever, be a future prospect: because it is not the problem but the solution. The sharing of knowledge does not divide knowledge: it causes it to grow and multiply.

KOICHIRO MATSUURA

IS knowledge sharing a utopia, the international community's new "buzz word?" We do not think so. A few examples are telling more than a dozen analyses.

In 1965, Singapore was overrun with shantytowns and its economy was underdeveloped. Since then, the authorities have pursued resolute policies, aimed at investing in education, improving skills and productivity and attracting high-added-value industries. The per-capita GDP of Singapore has, today, overtaken that of many countries of the North.

An economy based on the sharing and spread of knowledge is an opportunity for the emerging countries, and for the wellbeing of their populations. Thus, despite its poverty, the Indian State of Kerala now boasts a level of human development close to that

of the countries of the North: life expectancy has risen to 73 years and rates of schooling are in excess of 90%. Kerala contributes significantly to making India the 8th nation in the world in terms of scientific publications.

In 1971, a few thousand migrants settled in an empty plain in Villa El Salvador. Practising self-reliance, its inhabitants set up education centres and formed associations. A courageous endeavour of participatory community development, relying on women, transformed this shanty area into an organized town. Recognized in 1983 as a municipality, Villa El Salvador established its university in 1987.

Today, 98% of its children attend school, and the rate of adult illiteracy (4.5%) is the lowest in the country. The town now has 400,000 inhabitants, including 15,000 students. The municipal-

ity provides computer access points for its citizens, who express their opinions on issues under discussion within the community.

Shared knowledge is, thus, a powerful lever in the fight against poverty. It is also, today, the key to wealth production. Finland, which suffered a severe economic crisis following the breakup of the Soviet Union, is currently cited as a model: it invests almost 4% of its GDP in research.

Its education system is the highest rated among the industrialized countries by OECD. And the variation in performance between pupils and educational institutions is astonishingly low; demonstrating that success on the scale of knowledge societies can very well be combined with equity.

These are far from being isolated examples. In all parts of the world, different countries are in

the process of inventing new styles of development based on knowledge and intelligence. Because a society's development potential will depend less in future on its natural wealth than on its capacity to create, spread and utilize knowledge.

Does this mean that the 21st century will see the rise of societies based on shared knowledge? Since this is a public good that ought to be accessible to all, none should find themselves excluded in a knowledge society. But the sharing of knowledge cannot be reduced to the dividing up of knowledge, or the exchange of a scarce resource to which nations, societies and individuals lay competing claims.

In network societies, creativity and the possibilities of exchange or sharing are greatly increased. These societies create an environment particularly favourable to knowledge, innovation, training and research. The new forms of network sociability that are developing on the Internet are horizontal and not hierarchical, encouraging cooperation, as is well illustrated by the models of the research "collaboratory," or "open source," computer software.

The emergence of network societies and the concomitant reduction of transaction costs

encourage the rise of new forms of productive organization, founded on exchange and collaboration within a sharing community. This is particularly vital, set against the temptation of economic warfare.

These new practices hold out the hope that we shall be able to arrive at a fair balance between the protection of intellectual property rights, which is necessary for innovation, and the promotion of knowledge belonging to the public domain.

The sharing of knowledge cannot, however, be confined to the creation of new knowledge, the promotion of knowledge belonging to the public domain or the narrowing of the cognitive divide. It implies not only universal access to knowledge, but also the active participation of everyone.

It will, therefore, be the key to the democracies of the future which should be based on a new type of public space, in which genuine democratic encounters and deliberations involving civil society will make it possible to address social problems conceived in prospective terms. "Hybrid forums" and citizens' conferences prefigure this development in some respects.

The obstacles that stand in the way of knowledge sharing are

admittedly numerous. Like the solutions we are putting forward, they are at the heart of the UNESCO World Report Towards Knowledge Societies directed by Jérôme Bindé and published a few months ago.

The 21st Century Talk that we have just organized at UNESCO on the topic of knowledge sharing has doubtless helped to identify them more clearly: polarization, the digital divide and, even more serious, the knowledge fracture and gender inequality – these are the main impediments to the sharing of knowledge.

To overcome these obstacles, societies will have to invest massively in lifelong education for all, research, info-development and the growth of "learning societies," and to cultivate greater respect for the diversity of cognitive cultures and for local, traditional and indigenous knowledge.

Knowledge sharing will not, forever, be a future prospect: because it is not the problem but the solution. The sharing of knowledge does not divide knowledge: it causes it to grow and multiply.

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